

[Readings: Genesis 2:7-9; Psalm 51; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11]

“The Church is too obsessed with sin.” This is a complaint many of us have heard before. Sin makes us all feel a bit guilty, and therefore when the Church speaks of sin, everyone gets turned away from the Gospel. Who wants to feel guilty or be guilty?

We must acknowledge that there is a wrong way to speak about sin. We can approach sin not as the common problem of humanity, even of leaders within the Church, but simply the problem of this man or this woman. Everyone else is a sinner, while I’m among the redeemed. “Thank you, Lord, for not making me like others, like this tax collector over here...”

As we begin Lent, the Church invites every man, woman and youth to recognize the good news about sin. Sin is not caused by the individual faults and foibles of the weak but is instead a common condition of all of us who belong to the human family. It started with Adam and Eve. It continues with you and me.

The mystery of sin is that for some reason, we continue to engage in this same rebellion. We, like our first parents are proud. We, like them, are disobedient. This is what the Church means by original sin. There is something wrong with every person that doesn’t allow them to respond to God with gratitude. We continue to enact a cycle of violence against God and one another. We lie and cheat, we rob and murder, we grasp and seize, gossip and criticize.

The only way out of this cycle of violence is Jesus Christ. Jesus enters the desert and is tempted by the devil, tempted to seize control rather than give everything over to God. Worship the devil, and you can take control of all the kingdoms. It’s just a moment, a little lie (you don’t even have to believe it).

But Jesus will have nothing to do with this fallen and stingy logic. The good news about sin, which Jesus comes to demonstrate, is that every human being, even the Word made flesh, must deal with it. But Jesus also reveals that we don’t need to choose sin. It’s not the only option available to us. Instead of asserting our power, fighting against the logic of love at the heart of creation, we could give up this irrational fight. We could love unto the end.

Until we see the real danger of sin, its effects, we won't see the healing that Jesus comes to offer us. Maybe, we need to talk even more about sin. Think out the consequences of your choice to sin. Who will suffer in the end?

I hope you're all wearing comfortable shoes, because it's a long walk between here and Jerusalem, between Ash Wednesday and the Easter Vigil. Like Jesus did, we take this journey with friends, the community of believers. Like Jesus, we also take this journey with the devil lurking not far behind, biding his time. If the devil was gracious enough to appear in a red costume, with pitchfork and pointy tail, horns and a goatee, we could dismiss him at once and no harm done. But the Evil One has a lot more social grace than that. He knows how to meet us where we are, and to speak our language, and to make a good case for seeing things in a practical, reasonable light. That one, he's a talker, smooth enough to chat with God when the occasion arises, and bold enough to challenge even the divine Son. He makes sin seductive and attractive.

Where am I tempted to break my trusting and faithful relationship with God? What do I do to find strength in those times? Satan also tempts Jesus to break His faith in God. When do I encounter the temptation to trust only in myself, doubt God's love for me, or seek too much power? Saint Paul contrasts the disobedience of Adam with the obedience of Christ. Through one came death, through the other comes life. What are the choices I face between "life" and "death"? Do I always, in the words of Deuteronomy 30:19, "choose life"?

The devil tempted Adam, and Adam fell, losing his righteousness and innocence. The devil tempted Jesus, and Jesus resisted. Paul lets us know that we were all made righteous by Jesus' saving actions. But that doesn't mean we won't be tempted and won't sin. It means simply that we have another choice with our lives. As we prayed in Psalm 51, we need to admit our sinfulness and ask for mercy not just one time, but every time we sin. Temptations are all around us. Some of them we should be able to toss off pretty easily, others won't be so easy. That's why we need Lent to help us do better even as we ask forgiveness for the times we failed. Because ultimately, victory is ours. AMEN!